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P 231326Z SEP 07
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3517
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 003195

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/18/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [SOCI](#) [KISL](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: CHARITABLE EVENT SETS THE STAGE FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH SISTANI MODERATES

Classified By: Muthanna PRT Leader O'Friel. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (U) This is a PRT Muthanna reporting cable.

¶2. (C) Summary: The PRT's Ramadan distribution of wheelchairs to needy citizens of Muthanna successfully advertised how we hope to use Quick Response Funds to make a positive difference in people's lives. We also used the event to reach out to Sayyid Hameed al-Yasiri, Grand Ayatollah Sistani's chief representative in Rumaytha, and a voice of moderation. Hameed, convinced of our bona fides, said he would organize a meeting with his fellow clerics to identify Quick Response Fund projects that could help meet emergency needs. Engagement with Hameed may open channels of communication and cooperation with Sistani and the Marja'iyya. End Summary.

Strengthening Moderates with Quick Response Funds

¶3. (U) On September 20, 2007 Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Muthanna distributed 160 wheelchairs in the town of al-Warka to disabled citizens of the province identified by key community leaders - four non-governmental organization directors, the Director General of Health Services, the mayors of Warka and Rumaytha, and clerical representatives of Grand Ayatollah Sistani. We selected these leaders because of their standing and influence in society and their record of moderation. We used the opportunity of a Ramadan event to introduce Quick Response Funds, emphasizing our interest in working with community leaders to bring about immediate and tangible improvements in the lives of their constituents. Muthanna and Samawah Television covered the event, interviewing many of the happy wheelchair recipients.

First Step in Grassroots Strategy to Engage the Marja'iyya

¶4. (C) One underlying purpose of the wheelchair event was to engage clerics tied to Grand Ayatollah Sistani. Sayyid Hameed al-Yasiri, Sistani's chief representative in Rumaytha and also a descendent of the Prophet Mohammed, was initially reluctant to attend the ceremony, citing repeated disappointments with donors in the past. "Some NGOs and donors are interested only in publicity," he said. "Others focus only on big dollar projects that never serve the people." But the personal relationship of one PRT local employee with the cleric, along with the charitable nature of the event, convinced Sayyid Hameed to attend the ceremony and give us a hearing.

¶5. (C) In private afterwards, we explained to Sayyid Hameed the purpose of Quick Response Funds. Hameed welcomed our approach, saying, "Iraq right now is living through a

disaster, and its people face an emergency situation. I hope you will address these emergency needs." We replied that we wanted to work in concert with representatives of the Marja'iyya, or traditional Shiite clerical leadership, to identify projects that would make a positive difference in people's lives.

¶ 6. (C) We stated that we intended during the last three weeks of Ramadan to distribute to the poor food packages of items unavailable through the public ration system. Sayyid Hameed praised the Ramadan food initiative, promised his cooperation, and declared, "Good deeds incur debt. That debt will be remembered and repaid. I will gather the representatives of the Marja'iyya in Muthanna and we will sit with you, and together we can discuss the situation across the whole province." We hope to schedule a meeting with Hameed and his fellow clerics toward the end of Ramadan.

¶ 7. (C) Comment: The leading clerics of the Marja'iyya are vital pillars of moderation within the Iraqi Shiite community and counterbalances to Iranian influence in the wider Shiite world. They have been wary of dealing with us in the past. One way to overcome mistrust and build cooperation with the Marja'iyya is a "bottom-up" approach that focuses on establishing relationships with those they hold most dear, their students. These students act as representatives of the senior clerics in every Shiite province and run humanitarian organizations serving local communities in the name of the Marja'iyya. They are the backbone of the Marja'iyya's influence in society. By working with Sayyid Hameed and his fellow clerics in Muthanna, we may open other channels that prove useful elsewhere. End Comment.

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